

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

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FM AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 5442

INFO AMEMBASSY BONN

AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS

AMEMBASSY COPENHAGEN

AMEMBASSY LONDON

AMEMBASSY OSLO

AMEMBASSY PARIS

USMISSION NATO

C O N F I D E N T I A L THE HAGUE 1308

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: MASS, NL

SUBJ: F-104 REPLACEMENT: VIEWS OF LABOR PARTY'S

PARLIAMENTARY LEADER

1. IN A CONVERSATION WITH THE CHARGE ON MARCH 11, ED VAN THIJN, LEADER OF THE LABOR PARTY GROUP IN THE SECOND CHAMBER OF THE DUTCH PARLIAMENT, SAID THAT HE AND HIS COLLEAGUES HAD LITTLE SYMPATHY FOR MINISTER OF DEFENSE VREDELING'S DESIRE TO DEVELOP AN INDEPENDENT AND COORDINATED EUROPEAN AIRCRAFT INDUSTRY. VAN THIJN'S REASONS WERE TWOFOLD: FIRST, HE SEES THIS AS A "EUROPEANIST" AMBITION WHICH COULD WORK AT CROSS-PURPOSES WITH THE MORE IMPORTANT OBJECTIVE OF MAINTAINING ATLANTIC UNITY AND, SECOND, HE THINKS VREDELING IS PURSUING AN IMPOSSIBLE DREAM.

2. VAN THIJN CONTINUED THAT THE APPROACH OF THE LABOR PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP TO THE F-104 REPLACEMENT

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QUESTION WAS BASED ON THE THREE CRITERIA STIPULATED BY

THE PARTY'S DEFENSE EXPERT, PIETER DANKERT: (1) THE TOTAL COST OF THE REPLACEMENT PROGRAM MUST NOT EXCEED THE 2.3 BILLION GUILDERS BUDGETED FOR THIS PURPOSE; THE NETHERLANDS MUST GET THE 102 AIRCRAFT AS SPECIFIED IN THE DEFENSE WHITE PAPER-IN OTHER WORDS, THEY SHOULD NOT SETTLE FOR FEWER AIRPLANES IN ORDER TO STAY WITHIN THE BUDGETARY CEILING; (2) THE REPLACEMENT AIRCRAFT MUST CONFORM TO THE BASIC OBJECTIVE OF SPECIALIZATION ON THE CENTRAL FRONT; SPECIFICALLY, THE AIRCRAFT SHOULD BE CAPABLE OF FILLING A GROUND SUPPORT ROLE AND NOTHING ELSE; AND (3) THE REPLACEMENT AIRCRAFT SHOULD NOT, BECAUSE OF ITS EXCESSIVE MILITARY CAPABILITIES, CONTRIBUTE TO THE ARMS RACE.

3. TIME WAS SHORT AS VAN THIJN WAS INTERRUPTED BY HIS ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT WITH THE FIRST LOCAL NEWS ABOUT THE ATTEMPTED COUP D'ETAT IN PORTUGAL. CHARGE THEREFORE LIMITED HIMSELF TO SAYING THAT THE F-16 CLEARLY MET ALL THREE CRITERIA AS HE WOULD EXPLAIN TO VAN THIJN IN DETAIL IN THEIR NEXT CONVERSATION.

4. IN CLOSING, CHARGE ASKED VAN THIJN ABOUT REPORTS FROM STATE SECRETARY STEMERDINK AND OTHER SOURCES (THE HAGUE 1070) THAT VREDELING WAS IN SERIOUS TROUBLE WITH HIS OWN PARTY OVER THE F-104 REPLACEMENT ISSUE. VAN THIJN REPLIED THAT THIS WAS CORRECT BUT HE DID NOT SPEAK ABOUT IT IN DRAMATIC OR CONTENTIOUS TERMS. HE SAID THE PROBLEM WAS TWOFOLD: CONCEPTUAL, AS INDICATED IN PARA 1 ABOVE, AND PERSONAL. VREDELING HAD GREATLY IRRITATED HIS PARTY COLLEAGUES BY HIS REFUSAL TO DISCUSS HIS VIEWS IN ANY DETAIL.

5. UNLIKE STEMERDINK, VAN THIJN DID NOT THINK THAT VREDELING WAS NECESSARILY RIDING FOR A FALL UNLESS HE REGAINED THE CONFIDENCE OF HIS OWN PARTY. AS FAR AS THE PARLIAMENTARY GROUP IS CONCERNED, VAN THIJN THOUGHT THAT IT WOULD BE INCLINED TO LEAVE IT UP TO VREDELING TO CONTINUE AS DEFENSE MINISTER OR RESIGN IF THE GROUP COULD NOT ACCEPT HIS DECISION ON THE F-104 REPLACEMENT ISSUE. THE LABOR PARTY CONGRESS NEXT

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MONTH MIGHT WELL PROVE MORE OF A HURDLE FOR VREDELING, VAN THIJN THOUGH, ALTHOUGH NOT NECESSARILY A FATAL ONE. AT THIS POINT, IN FACT, VAN THIJN DID NOT BELIEVE THAT A MOTION WOULD BE VOTED CALLING FOR VREDELING'S RESIGNATION, SO VREDELING MIGHT BE ABLE TO "TOUGH IT OUT" PROVIDED, OF COURSE, HE CONTINUED TO HAVE THE SUPPORT OF PRIME MINISTER DEN UYL. ON THIS POINT VAN THIJN OFFERED NO COMMENT.

6. COMMENT: FROM THIS PRELIMINARY CONVERSATION WITH VAN THIJN (WHICH WILL BE FOLLOWED BY OTHERS) IT APPEARS THAT HE HAS BOUGHT THE DANKERT LINE THAT THE NETHERLANDS DOES NOT NEED AND SHOULD NOT ACQUIRE A HIGH-PERFORMANCE LIMITED SUPERIORITY AIRCRAFT IN THE F-16 CLASS. AT THE SAME TIME, VAN THIJN APPEARED TO BE DESIROUS OF NOT ALLOWING THE REPLACEMENT ISSUE TO BECOME A SOURCE OF CONFRONTATION BETWEEN VREDELING AND THE LABOR PARTY. TANGUY

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